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A PHILISTINE ARTIST.

BY MARGARET BERTHA WRIGHT.

CASTLES in the air are the most splendid of all architecture to build, and the least difficult to decorate, of any within the power of man. Next to those gorgeous, but unsubstantial towers, pinnacles and battlements of cloud come in facility of creation and furnishing—those that are built with ink and fancy upon the pages of novels. As in all other matters of taste and artistic culture, there is a vast difference in the character of these fanciful creations. Very often they are a mere perfunctory imitation of the prevailing taste and concrete modes, good or bad, of the day, and we are asked to imagine heroes and heroines of the most elegant culture living, moving, and having their being against backgrounds of household decoration and furnishing that fairly set our teeth on edge.

Balzac, for example, is a great charlatan in this very matter, high-priest at the altar of taste although he prided himself upon being. He wrote during a period of utter decadence of decorative art, the period of the continual feeble decline of all principles and ideas, between the pseudo classicism of the Empire to the utter extinction of ideal and forms in one dead-level of stuffed upholstery, of gilding and dull red of the bourgeois reign of Louis Philippe. Balzac was a famous collector of bric-à-brac, and impoverished himself all his lifetime and his heirs after him, by the museum of treasures he gathered round him. In the art of other days than his own he was really a connoisseur and expert; yet he was capable of describing boudoirs, meant to be gems of artistic luxury, so much in the manner of his own philistine day, that we smile superiorly at them as boudoirs we should destroy at once were they ours! He tells us that the ceiling of one of the chambers of the charming Chalet Mignon "is ceiled with wood, like the stateroom of an ocean steamer!" The *salon* of this same chalet arrests the eye with marvels of decorative wall painting in imitation of Chinese lacquer, brick of ten thousand colors among fantastic and impossible green foliage, all upon a black background framed in gilt, while the ante-chamber is painted in imitation of antique wood and gothic sculpture!

When he makes an impressive tableau in "*La Maison du Chat qui Pilote*," of the voluptuous Duchesse de Carigliano before the eyes of the *petite bourgeoise* who comes to beg her own husband back, the reader as well as that pretty little *ingénue* is expected to be greatly impressed by the coquette's appearance. So we are! but differently from our author's intentions!

We are marshalled through stately vestibules and majestic stairways all abloom with rare flowers, rich with statues and "a luxury that disdains expense," to the fresh boudoir where the Duchesse awaits us.

And there we see her "voluptuously lying upon an ottoman of brown velvet, placed in the centre of a sort of semi-circular background of white muslin hanging in soft folds over a yellow understuff. Bronze ornaments, arranged with exquisite taste, heightened still more the effect of this background, against which the Duchesse was posed like an antique statue!" We have only to remember the "ottoman" of this Balzacian period, a bloated, puffy monster of all stuff and buttons and fringe and tassels, and without apparent frame at all, a mere soft and comfortable hunch of upholstery, with as little artistic expression as an ash-heep, to have our own ideas of the "antique statue's" pedestal! And we have only to recall to memory the flounced and beribboned toilet-stands considered so elegantly coquettish in rural districts during the infancy of our own generation, to also form our own ideas of the Balzacian taste that hangs gathered white muslin over yellow underground, for the throwing up of antique statuary! In *Les Lys dans la Vallée* we have another thrilling description of a *salon*, of which, says Balzac, "the simplicity reaches to the height of grandeur." This *salon* is one of a *château* which bears a coat-of-arms sculptured over its stately portals, and is inhabited by a count and countess. This *salon* was *very clean*, we are told in the first line of description, "*d'une propreté vraiment Anglaise*," which might lead us to believe that commendable quality not inevitable in Châteaux of Torraine! It was walled and ceiled entirely in wood, painted in two shades of gray. The chimney-piece had for ornaments a clock contained in a square block of mahogany, and surmounted with a cup, and two large vases with old porcelain covered with threads of gold. A lamp was on the console. A bric-à-brac table was before the fireplace. Two wide cotton loops held up the curtains of white percale without fringes. Gray holland coverings, trimmed with green glimp, hid the chairs, and the embroidery in the countess'

hand told the reason that all was thus concealed. "No room among those I have ever seen since," continued the narrator, "has caused me such fertile and thronging impressions as those with which I was seized upon entering this *salon*, so calm and reserved," etc. The dining-room of this same *château* was equally impressive—with parcels of fruit and flowers in varnished paper. The curtains were white percale trimmed with red galloon; the buffets were old Boule, and the backs of the sculptured oak chairs were embroidered by hand!

We have seen the faded hand embroidery of that time; huge cabbage-roses, and lilies without family or genus, with foliage more than tropical, done by the hands of Sophie and Delphine Gay, the great Rachel, and others of Balzac's contemporaries, and we shut our eyes, *not* in awe of this "simplicity" which so easily reached to heights of "grandeur," even although the great realistic novelist was so overcome by it all! Perhaps the triumph of philistinism, however, is reached in the description of Madame Rochefide's "*appartement*" in an ancient dwelling of some "grand seigneur" near the Park Monceau in Paris. Beatrix de Rochefide was a faded coquette and adventuress, but of noble birth, a beauty in decadence both of reputation, youth, position, and charms, yet full of ideal and poetic fascination for youth which knows life only upon its sober and decorous side.

"Calyste ascended by a staircase, of which the stone steps had been freshly rotten-stoned, and the landings were full of flowers. He was ushered by the valet into the '*appartement*' by double doors of red velvet set with lozenges of red silk and gilt nails. He awaited Beatrix in a *salon* sober in style, but of a luxurious simplicity. It was hung with pomegranate-colored velvet, lightened by intermixed silk of dull yellow; the carpet was light red, and the windows seemed like hot-house beds, so full they were of flowers: the light was very feeble (for the benefit of decadent beauty), so that Calyste could barely make out two red vases of old *clédon* on the chimney-piece, between which shone a silver cup attributed to Benvenuto Cellini, and brought by Beatrix from Italy. The furniture in gilded wood upholstered in red velvet, the magnificent consoles, upon one of which was a curious clock, the tables covered with Persian cloths—all proved a former opulence of which these were the remains. Upon a tiny *encoignure*, Calyste noticed several jewels, a book commenced, in which sparkled the handle of a poignard ornamented with precious stones and serving as paper knife. Finally, upon the wall, ten water-color sketches, richly framed, represented the bedrooms that Beatrix had occupied in the various habitations where her wandering life had carried her; and *donnaient la mesure d'une impertinence supérieure*."

In that last sentence few will disagree; and few not wonder at the atrocious taste of the author in introducing that touch into the description of one who, whatever she was now, had once been a lady.

It is evident that in "Beatrix" Balzac pleased himself greatly with his elaborate description of the restored *château* far down in savage Brittany, where he hid a brilliant star of the literary and artistic firmament of Paris, Mademoiselle des Touches, an arrant Bohémienne of immense fortune, no morality, enormous sentimentality, and forty-two years of age. He uses many pages to describe roofs and gables, windows, doors, porches, peristyles, stairways, etc., of this luxurious dwelling amid the most savage and gloomy landscape beside a sullen and moaning sea, but our business is not with these, and only with the interior arrangements of various rooms. The *salon* was painted (everything was painted in Balzac's time!) entirely in gray, and decorated with antique furniture, mahogany and green silk, with curtains of white calico bordered with green; a round table, a square of carpet in the middle of the room, two consoles; on the immense chimney-piece a clock, representing the chariot of the sun, between two candelabras in the style of the Empire. The *salle à manger* held four large buffets of mahogany, a table and twelve mahogany chairs upholstered with hair-cloth, and several choice engravings also framed in mahogany! From the middle of the ceiling hung a magnificent lantern, holding two lamps (it was still the period of oil—1836), and as elegant as any in the grandest of mansions. All the ceilings were painted *en couleur de bois*, and the ancient staircase, with massive balustrade, was carpeted from top to bottom with a green carpet. But it was for her own private rooms that Mademoiselle reserved her highest efforts of artistic luxury. She wished in this sombre and melancholy habitation, before this sombre and melancholy landscape, to surround herself with the most fantastic creations of art.

So her own little *salon* was hung with beautiful Gobelin tapestries framed in marvelously

carved frames. The windows were draped with the most massive stuffs of old times, a magnificent brocade with double reflections, gold changing into red and yellow into green, and heavy with royal fringes and tassels worthy the most splendid of episcopal thrones. There was a *bahut* worth seven or eight thousand francs (that price-touch is worthy of Balzac, to whom money is foundation and apex of all things!), a table of sculptured ebony, a secretary with a thousand drawers incrustated with ivory arabesques and brought from Venice, and by other articles of gothic design. There were Japanese vases of fantastic design, and the carpet was from Persian looms. Her chamber was in the taste of the period of Louis XV. There was the sculptured wood, painted white and surmounted with little Loves throwing flowers, the couch covered with broché silk and the "*ceîl*" ornamented with four towering plumes; the hangings of real Persian with silver and silk cords and knots. The chimney-piece held a clock of ormolu between two large vases of Sevres blue mounted in burnished copper, the glass framed in the same taste: the *toilette* was à la *Pompadour*, its mirror swathed in laces. There were *couches*, lounges, sofas with tufted backs, a screen of lacquer, curtains the same as the furniture, *brochés* silk lined with rose-colored satin, and draped by cords like wellopes, a carpet of the Savonnerie—in fact all the rich, elegant, sumptuous things "amid which pretty women of the Eighteenth century made love." The dressing room was entirely modern and offered in contrast to the gallantries of the Louis XV. period, a charming suit of sober mahogany. The library was well furnished with books, and resembled a boudoir. The airy and charming trifles of women lived in it, glove boxes and gloves, statuettes, Chinese toys, lamp shades of white porcelain shadowed with dreamy landscapes; writing desks, one or two albums, paper weights, etc. One might also with surprise see there pistols, a Turkish *nhargile*, a riding whip, a hammock, a pipe, a rifle, a tobacco pouch, a soldier's knapsack—things that describe their bizarre mistress, better than words.

In all these elaborate descriptions Balzac, however rose-tinted his pen, never fails to betray how thoroughly *roturier*, after all, is the hand that guides it. Not taste but fashion is his ideal and we thus everywhere see copies and imitation, not original creations. It is only when he sets to work to describe something entirely outside the world of fashion, "periods," "style," that we find him really interesting and genuine—a copyist still, but of good, not meretricious art. One of his best, indeed his very best description, is one that certainly was taken from life in some dim and remote corner or province of France. He calls it a description of the ancient Castle du Guenic, a decayed noble family in lower Brittany, amid the same solemn landscape that surrounds the *château* of *Mademoiselle des Touches*. We will not pause at these repeated pages of exterior description, but will imagine for ourselves all these columns, gables, arches, towers, this mixture of byzantine, moresque and Italian architecture of the thirteenth century, and will enter at once by an oak door studded with nails into the large hall.

This vast hall is marvelously preserved. To the height of the elbow it is wainscotted with chestnut. A magnificent Cordovan leather, with embossed figures, but with the gold all time-eaten and dim, covers the walls. The ceiling is composed of planks artistically painted and gilded. The gold can scarcely be seen, being in the same state as the Cordovan leather, still one may discover a red flower here and there and now and then a green leaf. Probably, artistic restoration would bring to light decorations to prove that the timbers were previously repainted and restored during the reign of Louis Eleventh. The chimney-piece is enormous, of sculptured stone, and furnished with gigantic fire-dogs, of finely wrought metal. All the furniture of this hall is of oak, bearing the escutcheon of the family. Guns, swords, and implements, both of the chase and of fishing, hang upon the ancient walls.

The *salle à manger* opening from this vast hall is hung with tapestries of the Fourteenth century which are framed in bands of sculptured oak, black as ebony. The ceiling is of heavy beams, each beam enriched by antique carving, and the spaces between painted with golden flowers upon blue ground. Two old *dressoirs*, or dressers, are placed opposite each other and bearing four old goblets, an antique soup tureen of silver repoussé and two silver salt sellars, then a number of tin platters and various pots of gray-blue and gray, with covers and hinges of tin and the arms of the du Guenic in arabesque. The chimney-piece had been modernized, which proved that the family had used this *salle* during the last century. It was of sculptured stone in the taste of the period of Louis Fifteenth, and was furnished with an immense mirror, set in a depression of the wall and

framed with ornaments beaded and gilded; an antithesis which was indifferent to the family, however much it would have tormented an artist. Upon the shelf of the chimney-piece covered with red velvet, a central mural ornament or decoration was placed flat against the wall, of shell encrusted with copper, and upon each side two silver flambeaux of a curious antique design.

A large square table upon twisted columns occupies the centre of the *appartement*. The antique chairs are of twisted wood covered with old tapestry. Upon a singlefooted round table, imitating a vine root, is a lamp of bizarre form. This lamp consists of a common glass globe a trifle smaller than an ostrich-egg, fixed in a chandelier by a glass stem. The windows are casemented, set in lead, and are draped with curtains of brocatelle of changeable red and gold, with massive tassels, and suspended from the imposing baldaquins of which our lambrequins are the ghostly modern shadow.

By way of startling antithesis to this description of a majestic establishment in majestic decay, let us glance at another of Balzac's famous descriptions, perhaps the most famous one he ever wrote. This description, so often alluded to and sometimes quoted, is that of the Pension Vauquer, in *Le Père Goriot*:

"Nothing could be more dismal than this *salon* furnished with chairs and armchairs covered with horse hair, with alternating stripes of dull and shining substance. In the middle stood a round table ornamented with one of those liquor cases of white porcelain decorated with half-effaced threads of gold, such as are so common nowadays. The floor was badly planked and bare, the wall wainscoted to the elbow. From there the walls were papered with a varnished representation of the principal scenes in *Télémaque*, and of which the chief figures are colored. The panel between the grated windows represents the banquet given to the son of Ulysses by Calypso, just as it has represented it there for forty years. The fireplace is ornamented by two vases of aged artificial flowers under glass, and a marble clock in the worst possible taste. This room, the *salon*, exhales an odor without name in the language, and which can be no better called than the boarding-house smell. The room smells of mould, of rust, of ran-

cidity. It is cold, damp, and its humidity strikes through the garments, it tastes like the air in which one has coarsely dined, the horrible taste of fetid dinners, one could almost there detect the individual atmospheres mingled in one foul whole of each boarder, young and old. Yet compared to the dining-room adjoining, this is a *salon* perfumed and elegant as a boudoir. The *salle à manger*, is floored, walled and ceiled entirely with wood, formerly painted in a color indistinct to-day, and now overlaid with filth in many a bizarre design. Sticky buffets are there holding dingy glass and coarse faience, and in one angle a wooden case of pigeonholes, each numbered and containing the soiled and winestained serviettes of the pensionnaires. There is a long table covered with oil cloth greasy enough to enable any facetious inmate to write his name with his finger, crippled chairs, piteous straw mats, forever untwisting their strands and yet never completely untwisted, and miserable wooden foot-warmers full of holes, with broken hinges and scorched surfaces. To express how hopelessly the whole furnishing is old, cracked, rotten, trembling, rust eaten, maimed, blind, invalid, dying, would take too long and would not be pardoned by readers. It showed the reign of poverty without poetry, a poverty niggard, concentrated, threadbare. If it had not yet come to the ditch, it had already gathered ditchy stains, if not yet quite in holes and tatters, it was near falling to pieces with decay."

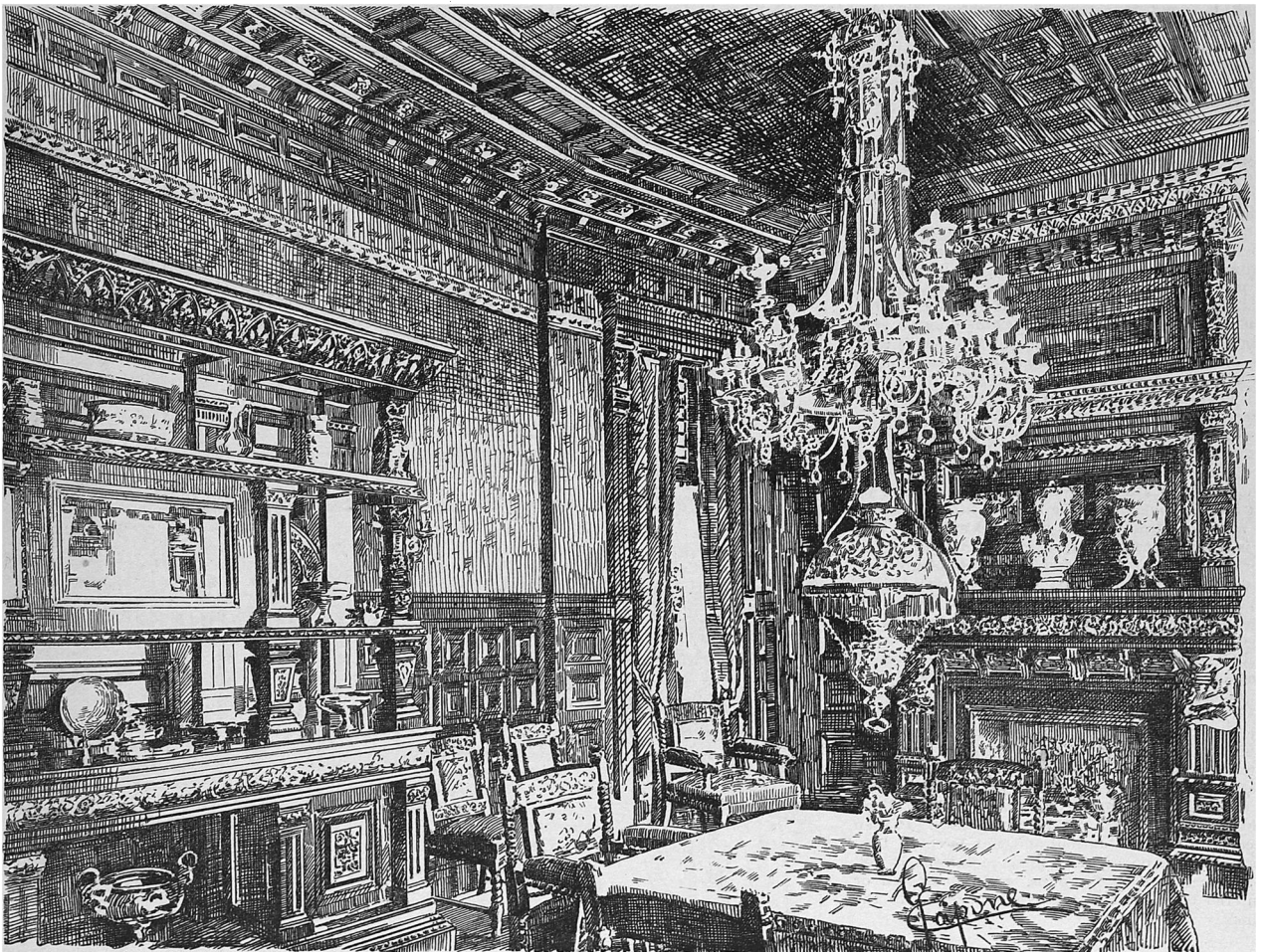
GLOSS TO FURNITURE.—To give a gloss to household furniture, any of the following pastes may be used: 1. Bees-wax, spirits of turpentine and linseed, equal parts; melt and cool. 2. Bees-wax four ounces, turpentine ten ounces, alkanet-root to color; melt and strain. 3. Beeswax one pound, linseed oil five ounces, alkanet-root, one half ounce; melt, add five ounces of turpentine, strain and cool.

WOOD PANELS.—For veneering for panels, thin stripes of white pine may be stained with bleached and tinted creosote, both wood and creosote being heated. When cold, the surface is to be varnished with shellac. The tones present a translucent appearance.

BAMBOO PORTIÈRES.—A down-town house in New York is having all that it can attend to in the manufacture of bamboo portières, which promise to become things of fashionable adoption. The portière is not a portière, and it is not all made of bamboo. It is a succession of bamboo strips strung on cords, each strip perhaps three inches long, alternating with brilliantly-colored glass beads. If these strings are hung close together, at intervals say of an inch, they form quite an effective curtain, and materially bar the view from or through a door or window. They can be parted and lightly flung aside at any point when it is desirable to pass through them, and they form a not ungraceful or displeasing curtain when looped up at the side like portières of cloth. But they do not fit into a sober room. They match with oriental surroundings, and "go with" light-colored walls and carpets. Where a half glance at an adjoining room is desirable, they serve better than portières of turcoman, but they prove to be only an oddity of the passing moment, of hardly sufficient beauty to justify their extended use or perpetuity.

MASQUES IN DECORATION.—The charm of the mediæval masque, whether in metal, majolica, wood, stone, or terra-cotta, well executed, with its various accessories, lies in the fact that the highest form of design is that of expression, though this may involve an extravagant expansion or contortion of the facial muscles, an exuberant energy, yet withal a symmetrical consistence as suiting a demon visage. The masque is the representative of legendary times, when evil spirits to the imagination of believers assumed somewhat of the human shape. The main idea, however, suggested by a masque is that of decoration for the sake of decoration, with its added scrolls, garlands, etc.

THE proposal of a member of the Stock Exchange for that body to erect a vast structure on their own and neighboring roofs, girded by gardens, is suggestive of turning the roofs of aristocratic upper-town houses to account by erecting on them light and handsome structures, with flower-bed borders, for recreation and festal entertainments.



DINING-ROOM IN PROMINENT NEW YORK RESIDENCE.